

SUBTEXT FROM A SCREENWRITING PERSPECTIVE

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У статті досліджено специфіку підтексту в кіно шляхом аналізу праць консультантів з написання кіносценаріїв К. Іглесіаса, Р. Маккі, Л. Сегер і Дж. Уестон. Підтекст розглянуто як засіб посилення інформативності кінотексту та активізації сприймання глядачів. Проаналізовано засоби та прийоми створення імпліцитних смислів у кіносценарії, зокрема вивчено розуміння підтексту в кіно, зазначено роль інтуїції в декодуванні неявної інформації, виявлено взаємодію внутрішньої й зовнішньої ліній, які розкривають переплетення експліцитного й імпліцитного в кіносценах, визначено особливості побудови діалогів, уведення пауз, створення візуальних та аудіальних ефектів, що несуть додаткову інформацію. Систематизація та узагальнення парадигми вивчення специфіки створення підтексту в кіносценаріях оптимізують формування теорії підтексту в кінознавстві та в літературознавстві, розкривають нові перспективи щодо адекватного вивчення й аналізу літературних творів, які містять приховані смисли.

Ключові слова: підтекст, кіно, сценарій, актор, глядач, К. Іглесіас, Р. Маккі, Л. Сегер, Дж. Уестон.

Leading screenwriters and script consultants claim that subtext is one of the most important features of a high-quality and successful film. Its major reason is that implicit meanings intensify the informational content of a screenplay, give it engaging force. The majority of books dedicated to the art technologies in writing a successful screenplay incorporate chapters on creating implied meanings. Understanding of subtext as an integral part of quality films, and methods and tools that generate the covert meanings are represented to varied degrees in worldwide renowned seminars by K. Iglesias, R. McKee, L. Seger, J. Weston, whose theoretical principles are reflected in such best-selling books, as

Story by R. McKee; *Making a Good Script Great*, *Spiritual Steps on the Road to Success*, *Writing Subtext: What Lies Beneath* by L. Seger; *Directing Actors*, *The Film Director's Intuition* by J. Weston; and *The 101 Habits of Highly Successful Screenwriters*, *Writing for Emotional Impact* by K. Iglesias. These works have already had a great and notable success in Hollywood and become guiding books for many screenwriters from all over the world.

At the same time such film art experience of subtext exploration and its film creation need further systematization and generalization for better conceptualization of subtext theory in the film and literary studies. These considerations define the

topicality of this paper. Its main objective is to outline the specific features of the category “subtext” by analyzing creative works of such script consultants, as K. Iglesias, R. McKee, L. Seger, and J. Weston. There are a few questions that require clarification: the specificity of understanding of the category “subtext” in the film; the roles of intuition and feeling in decoding and artistic presentation of implicit meanings in film images; the interaction between internal and external lines that represent the implicit and explicit in the scene; particularities of dialogue and pause, visual and audio effects concealing the implied information.

To begin with, let us define subtext as the implicit meaning, in other words, «the true meaning simmering underneath the words and actions. It’s the real, unadulterated truth» [3, p. 2]. L. Seger believes: “We encounter subtext all the time in daily life. People have a habit of not always saying what they mean; or, something they realize that it’s not good form, or polite, or acceptable to speak the subtext, so they cover it up with text and let the real meaning simmer beneath the surface. Sometimes they want the other person to understand the real meaning. Sometimes not” [3, p. 2].

This life philosophy appoints the subtext existence in a film, makes it closer to life, true and realistic for film viewers. That is how R. McKee explains it: “Nothing is what it seems. This principle calls for the screenwriter’s constant awareness of the duplicity of life, his recognition that everything exists on at least two levels, and that, therefore, he must write a simultaneous duality [...]. As in reality, so in fiction: He must veil the truth with a lining mask, the actual thoughts and feelings of characters behind their saying and doing” [2, p. 252–253].

Let’s have a closer look at understanding of the category “subtext” in a film, ways of generating implicit meanings, methods and tools of creating an implied meaning.

From the level of the implicit and unspoken, subtext needs deep penetration into the explicit for its adequate understanding, and furthermore it needs sharp insight, background knowledge, associations, etc. But on the entry level, when intuition proceeds deep understanding, it becomes an important identifier of subtext – the feeling that the inner meaning is elusive, it’s not that is spoken about. L. Seger explains: “Usually subtext is something you can’t quite out your finger on. It is felt. You sense it” [3, p. 4].

It is intuition that is attached an important and leading meaning by screenwriters and script consultants. J. Weston contemplates: “Intuition plays a big part in accurately reading subtext. [...] The ability to notice and appreciate subtext is commonly called an ability to “read between the lines.” It applies to reading between the lines of a dramatic script. [...] The skill of mining subtext – of spontaneously and

perceptively interpreting the truth behind actions, words, and events – is intuition” [4, p. 85–86].

Obviously, such deep understanding of the role of intuition determines the specificity of implicit meaning artistic presentation in film images, brings other unspoken senses to the audience on the intuition level. A text must give impulses for the emotional flash. The consequence and function of subtext in the process of watching a film is implied here. And these are the actors’ intuition and artistic feeling that have dominating roles in the decoding of subtext, because they determine methods that will give the film viewers a feeling that a major sense is under the unspoken words.

In this case, the work at implicit meanings is on two levels: the author subtext presentation and the actor subtext creation that harmoniously coexist and cooperate for adequate bringing implicit meanings to viewers. J. Weston singles out such kinds of subtexts, as a “character subtext” and a “story subtext”. The “character subtext” is the actor’s responsibility, and an actor must create, convey, and act out the implied sense for film viewers. As the screenwriter explains, “this is information about a character which the character may not speak of or even know about himself, such as his emotional and physical history, his relationships, his needs, and the images and associations that form his memories, dreams, wishes, and fears” [4, p. 89–90]. At a time “the “story subtext” is the real story you are telling. It’s the emotional events – it’s what happens on a human, emotional level in the imagined universe of the script to the characters that live in it” [4, p. 90]. And this aspect is the director’s responsibility, i.e. the level, degree and vision of the main idea of the text depend heavily on the director’s artistic sight, feelings, and decision.

Besides, J. Weston thinks that “when the script is thin, the actor and director have to make things up, create subtext that may not really be there” [4, p. 91]. And L. Seger emphasizes: “The actor can’t bring subtext to the role if the writer hasn’t shaded in any subtext” [3, p. 95]. But at the same time the consultant specifies that “sometimes the writer is unaware of the subtext. Some writers intuit what ideas and words best fit in the script, even though they can’t tell you exactly what the subtext is” [3, p. 95].

By the way, the question about the creating subtext by the author or the scriptwriter consciously or unconsciously is complicated and pending. Certainly, the screenwriter designs and traces every action in a film image, concerning either foregrounding of a particular scene or a film in general. But sometimes, as authors say, subtext as the consequent result was not premeditated initially. There are interesting quotes by A. Sargent, the famous American screenwriter: “Everything is subtext or has subtext or was subtext. I am sick of subtext and I suppose that in itself is subtext. It is everywhere and I am not interested in it when I am writing...” [3, p. 147] and “Subtext: I

didn't write that, but there it is. In our own lives, subtext" [3, p. 149].

In accordance with the subtext nature, a scene is to be formed in two levels: explicit and implicit. This is how R. McKee sees these two levels, taking into account the principle of the duplicity of life. "First, he (a screenwriter. – M.F.) must create a verbal description of the sensory surface of life, sight and sound, activity and talk. Second, he must create the inner world of conscious and unconscious desire, action and reaction, impulse and id, genetic and experiential imperatives" [2, p. 253].

A perfect example of the cooperation of these two actions has been illustrated in "Story": "Let two people change the tire on a car. Let the scene be a virtual textbook on how to fix a flat. Let all dialogue and action be about jack, wrench, hubcap, and lug nuts: "Hand me that, would ya?" "Watch out." "Don't get dirty." "Let me ... whoops." The actors will interpret the real action of the scene, so leave room for them to bring romance to life wholly from the inside. As their eyes meet and sparks fly, we'll know what's happening because it's in the unspoken thoughts and emotions of the actors. As we see through the surface, we'll lean back with a knowing smile: "Look what happened. They're not just changing the tire on a car. He thinks she's hot and she knows it. Boy has met girl" [2, p. 254]. Thus there is an organic coexistence of two actions in the scene: the external (fixing a flat) is explicit level, and the inner (romance line) is implicit level.

Significant importance in the process of the implicit meaning provision arises from dialogues where the main sense is elusive. L. Seger considers: "When writers write dialogue that is obvious, we say they're "on-the-nose." Characters say exactly what they mean in neat, logical, sentences. It's dull. It's bland. It sounds like a lecture or a sermon or treatise or a resume. The dialogue is not emotionally alive" [3, p. 3]. So dialogues keep unspoken impressions, thoughts, and feelings, and it makes the scene interesting and complete. R. McKee underlines: "Nor does this mean that we can't write powerful dialogue in which desperate people try to tell the truth. It simply means that the most passionate moments must conceal an even deeper level" [2, p. 256].

Moreover, K. Iglesias supposes that "the subtext comes from the action, not the dialogue. This is why we say actions speak louder than words. To create subtext, make a character say something that's counter to what he does..." [1, p. 214].

One of the tools that brings the "iceberg" effect is pauses. L. Seger believes: "I've always figured that the longer the pause before you get an answer, the fatter you will end up from where you want to go. You ask someone something [...] and if the pause is a long one, that's subtextually telling you something wrong here. Finally the answer comes [...]. But the pause told it all." [3, p. 30].

Visual and audio effects can also bring additional impressions, moods, and feelings. Thus, there are two dominant functions that such "decorations" have: firstly, generated associations hold all varieties of emotions and feelings; secondly, giving attached information provokes new meanings. L. Seger sees the role of "surrounding" effects in such a way: "A sunset might provoke associations of romance, of the end of things as night and darkness come, of nostalgia for what might have been, of the possibility of new events taking place in the secret, romantic night. A sunset has become a cliché because we bring so many associations to this image. We have seen it so often in films. A film just has to show a sunset and we usually know everything it means. [...] We know it means a great deal more than the end of the day" [3, p. 6].

Or a sound in a film scene can provoke new information: "Some films become well known for their sound metaphors. True, a train whistle might simply announce a train is coming, but in a certain context, a train whistle can carry a sense of loneliness, of long journeys, or having no money so one has to ride the rails" [3, p. 112].

Furthermore, subtext can carry other implications through details which appear inconspicuous at first sight. Implicit meanings can be communicated through the actors' gestures, so the audience needs to "read" body language. L. Seger assumes: "If we're unsure about the truth, we can look to a character's gestures. Although some gestures will be motivated by the actor [...]. The smaller movements can be as telling as the larger actions. The truth is often in the details" [3, p. 84].

Implicitness can also be generated through "literary" effects, because the screenplay is a specific and particular form of oral culture. So methods employed by writers can also be used by scriptwriters: repeating a word for further resonance, playing with double meanings of words, using the similes or metaphors to express an inner idea, etc.

Subtext in a film gives a special role to audience, because the adequate understanding of a film depends on them. K. Iglesias remarks: "The reason why readers welcome subtext is that it challenges them, engages them, and makes them active in the reading experience. When the reader's mind is engaged, it's automatically interested by what's on the page" [1, p. 84].

The same idea is expressed by R. McKee: "The scene is not about what the scene seems to be about. It's about something else. And it's that something else [...] that will make the scene work. There's always a subtext, an inner life that contrasts with or contradicts the text" [2, p. 255]. And in the decoding of this subtext that deepens and activates the perception is the main role of the recipient – "see through the faces and activities of characters to depths of the unspoken, the unaware" [2, p. 254].

In summary, subtext that generates implied meanings is attached a special importance by leading screenwriters and script consultants, as it deepens the film informational content and activates the audience. Screen gurus describe methods and tools of generating and creating implicit meanings in a great detail. They pay attention to intuition in the subtext decoding process, the interaction between the implicit and explicit in the scene, and peculiarities of dialogue and pause, visual and audio effects that conceal the attached information. And it is the film art experience that is important for the subtext theory development, opening new perspectives for exploring implied meanings in the literary studies.

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